

Robert May #101
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Q: Mr. May, when did you first go into the Army?

A: I chose, shortly after graduation from high school, to seek the Army career because there was no jobs to be had, and it seemed like the logical thing to do.

I wanted to... immediately I knew I wanted to go to Hawaii, and asked for the same and received the authorization to go to Hawaii, and told me I was going to a place near Pearl Harbor. Never having heard of it, I didn't even know what Pearl Harbor at the time, but then I did go there and found out that I was going to a place called Hickam Field, which was right beside Pearl Harbor, and I went directly there.

Q: When did you arrive at Hickam?

A: I arrived at Hickam, I believe it was sometime in the first part of April, 1941.

Q: What was your first assignment there?

A: Well I took basic training first. All the new people who had not received basic training had to take basic training someplace. So I took basic training first at Hickam Field and then I put in for radio school. And after about 6 or 7 months of waiting I had finally been accepted to a radio school, shortly before the attack. And I went to radio school. And in the mean time, prior to going to radio school, I had an assignment; I drove a truck for awhile. And so I did both, I drove a truck, and then when radio school started, then I went to radio school. At the time I had learned how to receive and send 8 words a minute and then of course the War broke out and that ended that school.

Q: What were you doing the morning the attack started?

A: Well, on the morning of the attack, like most GI's, I was in bed asleep and my buddy came over who had just gotten off guard duty and woke me up about 7:35, 7:40, and wanted to go to breakfast with me. But I just didn't feel like getting up to go to breakfast that Sunday morning so I laid there and talked to him and kept refusing to go to breakfast. I just didn't want to get up. I was very happy that day because the mess hall was completely blown apart, and had he and I went to breakfast, we probably both would have been killed immediately. Because tremendous damage was done to the barracks, that is, the mess hall itself.

Q: What was the first indication you had that something out of the ordinary was happening?

A: Well, when he first (my buddy) first came over and woke me up

to go to chow that morning, we were sitting there talking and as I said previously, I was refusing to go. And we heard this distant booming and booming and at first when it got a little louder, we had assumed it was the Navy come over on Sunday to wake us up with their dive bombers (which happened a lot on Sunday morning.) They come over on different missions and so forth, that they were out practice flying and so forth, and we thought it was them.

And the explosions seemed to get louder and so finally, I got up out of bed and walked over to the window and looked out of the window in between two of the wings of our stone barracks that we was in and I seen this plane shoot by on the end. But it went by so fast I couldn't realize what it was. And then I heard the rat-a-tat-tat and looked right at the very end of the two open wings and here come a plane flying right down through there, and I saw this object go out his belly. And I turned around to run from the window and I got about 5 or 6 feet from the window (and I was on the second floor when the explosion happened) and the screens flew off, and the dust just filled the whole wing of where I was at from all the dust that was in the screens and so forth. I realized right then that something was really bad. And along and about that time someone was running in the end of the barracks hollering, "The Japanese are attacking! The Japanese are attacking! Everybody out! Everybody out of the building!"

Q: What did you do then?

A: Well, as I once again, as most of the GI's did, it was either we'd sleep in our skivvys or even in the bare. And I didn't have any clothes on, and I just slipped on a pair of the old blue denims. And all I had on was a pair of pants. I didn't have no belt, no underclothes, no shoes, no shirt, no socks, no nothing. And my buddy was fully dressed, having just gotten off guard. So he and I ran out barefooted, (me) and out across the door, down to the first floor, and out the side, and across the parade ground, (planes buzzing all over and rat-a-tat-tat and all over the place) and went over and stood alongside the Snake Ranch, which was the local beer joint there, and we watched the planes go by. And my buddy was having a ball because he still had his .45 on his hip and he was just firing away like mad, and I was standing there just a shakin'.

Q: So how long did you spend over there?

A: Well, we probably spent about, I would say in the neighborhood of somewhere around 20 minutes to 25 minutes, and then it looked like there came a little, oh, kind of a stoppage of the diving and strafing and so forth. And we decided to run back across the parade ground again and go back to the barracks so I could get some more clothes because I didn't have any clothes on except for the pair of skivvy's that I ... uh pair of blue pants that I had on. So we did.

One of the episodes (that this has never lost my memory) is that as we stepped about away from the back end of that Snake Ranch and ran across the road and up onto the parade ground, we

saw three men setting up a .30-caliber water-cooled machine gun, and here come a dive bomber. Now it was just almost like he stopped long enough to lay the bomb right square in the middle of them and BOOM, they were all gone; nothing but a big hole.

And we never broke stride or anything. We just kept right on running and right on by them afterwards, and right on back in the barracks, and then I got more clothes on. And when I got the more clothes on, my buddy waited for me, and we went back downstairs and we went from one wing into another wing. We were heading for the parking lot where the automobiles were, to get away from the building because they were really blasting the heck out of the building. And as we went from this one wing to the other wing, we looked back across the parade ground where we were standing at that Snake Ranch, and the whole end of the Snake Ranch was gone, right where we was standing just a matter of about 4 or 5 minutes before that.

Q: Did you see any of the planes on the ground get hit or any of the hangars get hit too?

A: Well, we saw the planes, that is the bombers from the air, drop a few bombs. Most of what we saw dropping bombs were dropping on Pearl Harbor. We did see a couple hit some of the hangars. We did see a couple miss the large stone barracks. But the most that we did see dropping was actually landing on Pearl Harbor. It missed Hickam Field all together. And we did see Coast Artillery shooting. They didn't hit anything but they were leaving a lot of puff marks all around in the sky like that.

Q: So what did you do after you left the building there?

A: Well, after we left the building, by the time we got into the second wing, the word came down very fast that everybody that worked on the line was to report to the line. So my buddy and I split right there. He ran back across into our wing, where we were stationed and got his directions to where he was supposed to go. And he was ordered back over on the line to work, that is to help out over there.

Seeing as I didn't work on the line (I was going to radio school) those people had to stay wherever they could stay. They didn't want them on the line. They had people do the jobs and so forth, so they didn't want those people bothering anybody over there. They had plenty of help.

So I had to stay there and I was trying to seek a place to go, or I had no job at that particular point, going to radio school, so I headed back out with about 6 or 8 other people toward the parking area, where the cars were parked. I didn't know what I was going to do but I was going to get out of the building. And as we left this wing to go out, a dive bomber dived down and a Captain was leading us out (there was a Captain and a Lieutenant and the rest was enlisted men); he was the first out and we heard this rat-a-tat-tat-tat real fast like that and he turned around and he hollered, "Back in! Back in! Back in!" and so we ran back in.

And he of course, being the first one out he was the last one

in. And bomb went off right outside the door and we all flew through the air from the concussion. And the only one who was hurt was the Captain and he got a piece of shrapnel right in his rear end and the blood was running out his leg.

And so we waited until that was over with and then we got back up and went out and we dispersed outside this wing and went toward the parking lot. And I didn't really know what I was going to do. I was just looking for someplace to go. There was no place to hide. We didn't have any dugouts. We didn't have any holes to crawl into except the ones that was already made by some of the bombs. And I spied an electrical hole, where the electricity and stuff was going through the ground and this great big steel cover, and so I looked around. I couldn't hardly get it up myself because it was stuck so fast. But I managed it after struggling considerably, to get it off. And I looked down into the hole and there it was, a nice big hole with all cement in it and everything like that, and some lines going through it.

And so I jumped down in that there and I wasn't in it, I don't suppose, 30 seconds and I had 6 guys right on top of me (laughter). They saw me going down the hole. And I actually spent the rest of the attack right in that hole.

Q: What was the sight that greeted your eyes when you came out?

A: Utter chaos. Utter chaos. I never realized so much damage could have been done in so quick a time, and especially the parking lot where I was close to (right beside actually). Cars were burning and of course, when I looked up, one of the first things I seen was Old Glory flying up there, and just all tattered and torn from everything, the shrapnel, and so forth and uh...

Q: Is that the one that the picture was taken that was made into a poster?

A: Yes, that is the same one, and by the way, it's still in existence and last I heard it was in Denver out at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Now I think they brought it back to Hickam and they had it over at the PACAF building in the Hale Makai over there. And I think that's where it is right today, at the present time. I think they brought it back home and that's where they display it over there.

But in addition to saying that there, of course then I saw all the fires and so forth raging in the buildings. The stone barracks you know, they was on fire. And we have photographs in our archives today that show the actual fire coming, shooting out of the wings of where the beds and so forth were. And that's the stuff that I had seen too. I think one of the ... I told previously, when I answered your question about coming back across the parade ground and seeing these three guys blowing up, I think more so than anything else, what probably has never left my mind is when we ran by those guys that had been blown up and came around the building to go into our wing to get more clothes on for me, I seen about 6 or 7 guys backed up in a corner of one of the wings, where two wings came together, and they were all

firing their rifles as we come around the corner and as we did come around the corner, we heard this rat-a-tat-tat of another dive bomber coming down strafing, and of course we ducked. We thought he was after us but he wasn't really after us, he was after those guys, they were all firing their rifles. And one by one just like ten pins at the bowling alley, BING BING BING, from what didn't hit them directly bounced off of the sides of the walls, but every one of them within a matter of 30 seconds, all 6 or 7 of them was gone just like that; one at a time BANG BANG BANG the bullets glanced off of the side of the building and I have never got that out of my mind. And when I went to see TORA! TORA! show, my wife and I walked into that show (we didn't get there right at the beginning of it) and the first thing I seen on the screen was a replay of that scene, and I just let out an "Oh my God, I saw that happen!" and when I walked into the theater. And that was embarrassing but that same thing happened that they showed on the screen is what I happened to see that morning like that. And I've never got that out of my mind. It was just like I said, just like ten pins, BING BING BING and they were going down one at a time.

Q: Would you say things were disorganized right after the attack or...

A: Very disorganized. Very.... it's something that no one knew really, I'll say, us guys, we didn't really know that it was going to happen like that. And everybody was excited and everybody was in a strain and the stress and not knowing where to go. You couldn't hide. There was no holes to hide in. You'd get behind a building and they come after you there and the wooden barracks, you know, that was just impossible. I... it just seemed that nowhere.... the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing, you know. And it wasn't intentionally but these poor... but it was just the terrible excitement of what was happening you know. People just didn't know, and in my estimation I could say it in two words, it was "utter chaos" at the beginning, you know, and then cooler heads prevailed and when they did, then things turned to an assemblance of the right thing to do and which they did.

There was a lot of bravery that day. I have a very dear friend of mine today that I saw carrying a young man to the hospital, and he and I went over in the boat together before the War, and I asked him, I says, "Joe" (his name was Joe Muzual(??) I says, "Joe, do you need any help?" He say, "No, I think I can get him. I'm going to put him in that car and take him to the hospital." and he was... the man that was hit real bad was trying to hold his guts in, and Joe was trying to hold his guts in and put him in the car at the same time. And that's when I asked him if he needed help and he had him in the car by that time and headed toward the hospital in this car. First he had him on his back, that's when I first noticed him. He had this boy on his back. He had him across his back and he was holding his intestines in by having him across his back. He had his arm and one hand, leg, and the other holding and I saw him do it. And that's when I ran over to him and by the time I got to him he was

putting him in the car.

And uh, you talk about bravery and things beyond the call of duty. This Joe Muzual was just a tremendous young man, and as I said, I knew him. He came over in the boat with me. And then nothing ever happened. I went in another direction to do something else. I don't know what it was but I went in the other direction and I completely forgot about this episode.

When I formed the 11th Bomb Group in 1960, I started hunting for Joe Muzual's address. And I think it was about 1961, I found it, and I wrote him a long letter. And in it I said, "Joe, did you ever get a medal for the one deed that I saw you doing on December 7th, and that was saving that man's life?" and I said, "By the way," I said, "did he ever... did you make it? Did he live?" And he wrote a real nice letter back to me and he says, "You know, you're the only person who ever mentioned that episode." And he says, "I never said anything to anybody." He said, "But I remember you coming and asking me if you could help me, and I told you I thought I had it well in hand. The answer is, no, he didn't make it, and I didn't get him to the hospital because a plane ran us off over the curb and ruined the under carriage of the car and stopped, and then I tried to get him... I had about a block and a half to go." He says, "By the time I got him almost to the hospital he was already dead." But he said, "You know, that's odd, all those years from 1941 of that attack, you're the only one that ever mentioned that episode about me trying to save that young man's life." And he says, "No, I never did get a medal for it."

But you know, even as late as today, I still think the man really deserved a medal because it was something that he did, this extremely trying good deed, to save that young boys life like that.

Q: Did you see any of the B-17's that came in during the attack?

A: No, I did not. I didn't see any B-17's. I knew they were coming in uh, you know. Well, I guess I could reiterate that just a little bit. I didn't see them land. I saw one after it landed. But I didn't see them land. I didn't even see them flying in. But I saw one, as I had told you previously, when I was driving the truck part time, while I was going to radio school, one of my jobs was I had to go over and disperse my trucks. I had three trucks assigned to me, and I was dispersing a truck. By this time the B-17 had already landed on Hickam and I seen that B-17 and it was cut in half. It was burning. But actually, I didn't see any of them land.

Q: What about the crew? Did they....

A: I didn't even see the crews or anything. But I am assuming that you probably know this by now. I think everybody else knows this, that Major Truman landed; was bringing them in. And Truman landed them. Today he's a Four-Star General. He's a member of our association; life member of our association.

Q: Did you work at all in the clean-up and repair activities at

Hickam after the attack?

A: Uh, the part that I played in that there, was in some of the ground work. Everybody had a little bit of job to do and we were trying to fill in a lot of the holes that was made, and to get some of the assemblance of all the stuff that was picked up. I think we all did parts of that work. Picking up debris of some kind, the roofs and stuff that was blowing off; things like that. I helped on that type of stuff.

Q: What was situation like.... just generally the atmosphere, in the first few days after the attack?

A: Well, right after the attack was over with, this same buddy and I. We were very, extremely close. We found each other right after the attack was completed and things were still in utter dismay at that particular time. And so a lot of the men were ordered to disperse and to take up machine guns if they could.

My buddy and I got a .50 caliber machine gun and we took off with a tug across the landing strip with our .50 caliber machine gun and then I don't know how many cases of ammunition we had, and a couple of shovels with this tug. And we went clear out to what we called the boon docks, in those days, and went out there and we dug us a trench. Actually we dug three trenches before we could get one that we could go in. The first one we get, we hit some coral. We couldn't, down through the second... we hit water. And so it was just filled right in with the water. Of course it was a marshy area out there.

So we dug out there, and we dug it in the form of a "T" and we set the machine gun up right in the middle of the "T", so that we could be in any direction down in the trench itself without getting hit. And so he and I maintained that machine gun for the rest of December 7th, and the 8th, and the 9th, and before we even came back over here. One of us run back an forth and brought food for both of us, and that's where we stayed for two days; almost two days and a half, out over in the boon docks over there, until they ordered everybody back in that they could use.

Q: Was there a lot of rumors floating around after the attack?

A: Rumors galore. That same day we changed uniforms three times. The uniforms we had on, then we went to khakis, so we one on at that time that was the blue denim, then we went to the khakis because they said they were going to land and we wanted them to make sure that they would show up good at night. If they were going wear black, we were going to have the khakis on which was a light uniform. Then we went to the dark outfits again. That same day we had three different changes of clothes on because we thought they were going to land and try to take us over.

They also told us that the Japanese were going come down; that meant cold steel to cold steel. And that sent shivers right up and down your spine the minute they talk about cold steel because we had our rifle with us of course, with all the gas masks and everything else. We actually put our knives on the end

of our guns.

Q: Sounds like a really interesting experience.

A: Well, it's one that doesn't leave you. I have admitted many times I was very fortunate. I escaped.... The only time that I really got hurt... not hurt.... The only time I even came close is when I told you I was going out the door with this Major and this Captain... this Captain and this Lieutenant going out, when he come in the door and got hit. I was blown through the air probably about 15, maybe 16 feet and landed on my knees around the corner. And that's the closest I came to getting hit that particular day.

I felt... I still feel to this day that the good Lord had something in mind for me. I don't know what, but, I believe that maybe as far-fetched as it might seem, that maybe all along there was a job for me to do and that was to bring this (something??) of people back together again after all those years, and that's been my.... I've dedicated my life to these people.

Q: Well, you've certainly done a fine job of it. I wouldn't have been able to get these interviews if it hadn't been for you.

A: Well, I'm very happy to do it because it's not for Bob May but it's for my people. I call them my people, my association, my members. I love every one of them and as I said, I've dedicated my life to them. My family gave up just about everything there was in the world to let me do this for 25 years, and I'm real happy to do this. And every time I see these guys grab each other, and hug, and even kiss each other after all these years together; seeing each other for the very first time. It's worth all the heartaches and the hard work and so forth. I've been very fortunate. I've been very fortunate. I give many thanks to the good Lord for letting me live this long, even though I've had three heart attacks and open heart surgery, I'm just happy about the whole thing.

Q: Well, that's great. Thank you.